

## Brazil and Ronaldinho from Big Hope to Big Flop

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Zinedine Zidane rediscovered his game in Germany, while Ronaldinho left his in Barcelona. Fans behaved on the streets, yet referees couldn't cope with on-the-field cheats.

This was a World Cup full of surprises and disappointments that did little to improve the game's battered image. Although it had its highs, the lows won easily.

Fans were full of hopes when the World Cup kicked off June 9. Defending champion Brazil would captivate them with "samba soccer"; the United States and the African and Asian nations would continue to emerge; and England would prove itself a genuine title contender after 40 years without a sniff of the trophy.

Instead, the Europeans turned the World Cup into a private party. Italy and France made the final, with host Germany and Portugal also in the last four.

Whoever wins the title, reaching the final is a major achievement for the entire Italian team and for France midfielder Zidane.

The Italians have been distracted by a match-fixing scandal that threatens to end with the demotion of top teams Juventus, AC Milan, Fiorentina and Lazio. More than half of the Italian squad plays for those clubs, but the players have managed to concentrate on winning games.

Their semifinal performance against host Germany, a team that improved each game, was the best of the tournament. Both teams played high-quality soccer and the Germans were expecting their second penalty shootout in a row when Fabio Grosso and Alessandro Del Piero scored goals in the last two minutes of extra time.

All season, Zidane had looked a shadow of the man who was the world's best player five years ago. At 34 and with retirement only one game away, he shrugged off his weary Real Madrid form and produced the best World Cup moments on the ball with his trademark touches and sublime passes.

By contrast, Ronaldinho was the World Cup's biggest flop.

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